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Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the Tension between Medieval and Modern Times



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SUMMARY

Among the many plays written by William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* is probably the tragedy that has attracted the greatest attention from critics, scientists, actors, students and lovers of literature in general. There exist numberless theories and postulations inspired by the great tragedy, and most of them deal with a psychologistic vision of the character. However, informed by the contemporary belief that whatever happens to an individual is also a social occurrence and even a political event, the view may be held that there may be strong social and historical undercurrents fuelling the action and/or inaction of Hamlet.

This dissertation purports to examine Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as well as Shakespeare's vision of Denmark, in the light of the socio-historical setting of the tragedy, seen through the lens of modern social science, which may shed light on the complex social and historical tensions within the local context of this artistic creation. It is the general aim of this study to determine to what extent the torments and turbulences that assail Shakespeare's Hamlet can be interpreted as a series of tensions resulting from the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Shakespeare's vision of Denmark, in turn probably moulded by the dawning seventeenth century in England. This dissertation pursues the following specific objectives: (a) to review relevant existing interpretations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and different levels of analysis achieved: psychological, social, and so forth; (b) to explore socio-historical changes in Europe in general, and in England in particular, during the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and (c) to explore the text of the tragedy in general, with a strong focus on the features that might reveal two different ideologies (respectively stemming from a dying feudalism and a strongly emerging capitalism) as well as the tension between both.

The conclusions of the study do not yield Hamlet as an entirely medieval man. His studies at the University of Wittenberg in Germany have left in him the imprint of humanism. Yet, the prince's "modern" outlook on life seems limited to humanism, as he is unable to grasp the new capitalist order running underneath this exaltation of the individual. Indeed, Hamlet's medieval upbringing, together with his European studies, has not made Hamlet ready for political action upon the assassination of his father and the subsequent usurpation of the Danish throne by the assassin. Hamlet's medieval education instilled in him the concept of regicide as the most heinous crime; yet, to avenge the death of his father, regicide seemed to be the only possible way. Therefore, he stands in a "lose-lose" situation, one in which nothing can be done: the young prince's feudal ethics is brought into a tragic maze, a moral maelstrom from which there will be hardly any escape.

RESUMEN

Entre las muchas obras escritas por William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* tal vez se destaca como la tragedia que ha atraído la mayor atención de críticos, científicos, actores, estudiantes y amantes de la literatura en general. Existe un universo de teorías y postulados que surgen de la gran tragedia, la mayoría de los cuales asumen una visión psicologista del personaje. Sin embargo, y sobre la base de que lo que le acontece a un individuo es un hecho social, y tal vez un acontecimiento político, se puede postular la existencia de un potente motor social e histórico que impulsa la acción o inacción del protagonista.

La presente investigación tiene como propósito examinar *Hamlet*, de William Shakespeare, a la luz de su medio histórico, a través de la lente de las ciencias sociales de hoy, las que pueden iluminar las complejas tensiones sociales e históricas en el marco de esta creación literaria. El presente trabajo se propone como meta explorar la medida en que las problemáticas y torbellinos que atormentan a Hamlet se pueden interpretar como emergentes de las tensiones que resultan de la transición del feudalismo hacia el capitalismo europeos en la visión shakesperiana de Dinamarca, probablemente, a su vez, influida por el nacimiento del siglo XVII en Inglaterra. Esta tesis tiene como objetivos: (a) examinar interpretaciones substanciales sobre Hamlet, en cuanto a sus aspectos psicológicos, sociales, y otros; (b) explorar los cambios socio-históricos en Europa en general, y en Inglaterra en particular, en la transición del feudalismo hacia el capitalismo, y (c) examinar el texto de la mencionada tragedia en particular, enfatizando especialmente las particularidades que podrían revelar dos ideologías en pugna (resultantes de un feudalismo decadente y de un capitalismo naciente), así como las tensiones entre ambas.

Las conclusiones de este estudio no revelan a Hamlet como una figura enteramente medieval. Su trayectoria en la Universidad de Wittenberg le ha dejado la impronta del humanismo. Sin embargo, la visión del universo del príncipe pareciera limitada a esta dimensión, ya que Hamlet parece no poder comprender el nuevo orden capitalista que subyace a la exaltación del individuo. Ciertamente, la crianza "medieval" de Hamlet, conjuntamente con sus estudios en Europa, no han preparado a Hamlet para la acción ante el asesinato de su padre, y la usurpación del trono de Dinamarca por parte del asesino. La formación medieval le ha inculcado a Hamlet el concepto de regicidio como el más horrendo de los crímenes. Sin embargo, para vengar la muerte de su padre, un nuevo regicidio parecería ser la única posibilidad. Por ende, Hamlet está en una actitud inherentemente perdedora, en la cual nada se puede hacer: la ética feudal del joven príncipe lo lleva a un laberinto, un torbellino moral del cual no habrá escape posible.

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"All men are historians."
Thomas Carlyle

1.- INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH RATIONALE

1.1.- INTRODUCTION

Among the many plays written by William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* is probably the tragedy that has attracted the greatest attention from critics, scientists, actors, students and lovers of literature in general. Innumerable interpretations have emerged from such disciplines as sociology, psychology, anthropology and several other fields, in addition to the multiple visions stemming from the area of literary studies. *Hamlet* has frequently been seen by some as Shakespeare's perfect piece of work, which has for centuries served as food for thought and analysis. Others have seen *Hamlet* as a flawed tragedy, depicting an impossible reality and presenting unbelievable characters. In short, as many a critic has asserted, more has been written about *Hamlet* than can be read in a lifetime.

There exist numberless theories and postulations inspired by the great tragedy, and most of them deal with a psychological vision of the character. Indeed, *Hamlet* has traditionally been considered to be a tense individual fighting against his need to avenge his father's assassination at the hands of Claudius—the victim's own brother, now the new king—and against misgivings and doubts about the veracity of the dead man's ghost, all this taking place in the midst of the Prince's highly warped relationship with his mother, now the usurper's wife.

Thus, the depressed Prince of Denmark is frequently seen as a sombre, inscrutable ever-procrastinating man, immersed in a sea of deep, unfathomable trouble, and explanations for his behaviour have come from as many standpoints as there are theories about the complexities of the human psyche.

However, informed by the contemporary vision that whatever happens to an individual is also a social occurrence and even a political event, the view may be held that there may be strong social and historical undercurrents fuelling the action and/or inaction of Hamlet. In his 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* Marx (cited in Kreis 2000:4) clearly postulates:

The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

As a matter of fact, Shakespeare's Europe had already emerged from feudal times and embraced the relatively young capitalist mode of production. Nonetheless, it should be clear that medieval dominant ideology was still present, and might have been indeed strong in the writer's vision of the Danish nobility and their values.

This dissertation purports to examine Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as well as Shakespeare's vision of Denmark, in the light of the socio-historical setting of the tragedy, seen through the lens of modern social science, which may shed light on

the possibly complex social and historical tensions within the local context of this artistic creation.

It is the general aim of this study to explore and determine to what extent the torments and turbulences that assail Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can be interpreted as a series of tensions resulting from the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Shakespeare's vision of Denmark, in turn probably moulded by the dawning seventeenth century in England.

This dissertation pursues the following specific objectives:

- To review relevant existing interpretations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and different levels of analysis achieved: psychological, social, and so forth.
- To explore socio-historical changes in Europe in general, and in England in particular, during the transition from feudalism to capitalism.
- To explore the text of the tragedy in general, and Prince Hamlet's discourse in particular, with a strong focus on the features that might reveal two clashing ideologies (respectively stemming from a dying feudalism and a strongly emerging capitalism) as well as the possible tension between both.

It should be noted that no attempt will be made to radically oppose or refute existing interpretations of *Hamlet*, as these, together with the postulations of this

proposed work, should not be regarded as mutually exclusive, unless one were to hold the view that the influence of a social setting on an individual could be thoroughly denied or ignored.

1.2.- BASIC HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

1.2.1.- BASIC HYPOTHESIS

The present study rests on the following hypothesis:

The psychological torments and turbulences that affect Shakespeare's Hamlet may be interpreted as a series of tensions resulting from socio-historical changes in an imaginary Denmark as perceived by Shakespeare (as the mediator of multiple intertextualities). The mentioned tensions may be seen as resulting from the transition from feudalism to capitalism in the playwright's local setting. In other words, the psychological tension of the central character cannot be seen solely in terms of an individual problematic, but also in the light of his socio-historical environment.

1.2.2. GENERAL CONTENTS

The study will touch upon three important research areas:

(1) Historical research

This study will explore historical perspectives, with a view to establishing the nature of perceived historical tensions existing in Europe in general, and in Shakespeare's England in particular, concerning the passage from feudalism to capitalism.

(2) Traditional views on *Hamlet*.

It would be almost impossible to examine this tragedy without exploring the most important view held by critics who have analysed this work over the last four hundred years, as these critical views have helped shape several interpretations from different perspectives. Therefore, a brief review of the seminal critical work on *Hamlet* will be attempted.

(3) Exploration of the tragedy

Finally, a scene-by-scene examination of the play will be conducted, with a view to unveiling both ideology-related elements and allusions to social practices or cultural artefacts that might be indicative of socio-historical tension in the text in general, and in Prince Hamlet's action in particular.

1.2.3.- THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The model of textual exploration that has been chosen is that informed by the principles of critical discourse analysis as applied to literary linguistics, as well as the post-structuralist conception of authorship propounded by the critic Roland Barthes (1968). As regards the former, a relatively young discipline, Luke (1998:48) states:

The principal unit of analysis for critical discourse analysis is the text. Texts are taken to be social actions, meaningful and coherent instances of spoken and written language use. Yet their shape and form is not random or arbitrary.

Fairclough (1992) adds:

Critical Discourse Analysis [...] is based upon a view of semiosis as an irreducible element of all material social processes. We can see social life as interconnected networks of social practices of diverse sorts (economic, political, cultural, family etc). The reason for centring the concept of 'social practice' is that it allows an oscillation between the perspective of social structure and the perspective of social action and agency – both necessary perspectives in social research and analysis. [...]. By 'social practice' I mean a relatively stabilised form of social activity

A final note should be made about the concept of 'authorship' in the present exploration, as in literary theory, researchers have not found it easy to define term

"author" beyond a merely legal setting. With the advent of postmodern literature, critics such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault have studied the significance of authorship in relation to the meaning or interpretation of a text. In his seminal essay "*Death of the Author*" Barthes (1968) affirms:

The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the 'human person'. It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author. The *author* still reigns in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines, as in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs. The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice. The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us (Barthes, 1968: 117-118).

Barthes seriously questions the concept that a text can be attributed to any author. The critic affirms that "it is language which speaks, not the author". The words and language of a text itself determine meaning for Barthes, not any one person supposedly in possession of legal responsibility for its production. Every word of written text is, according to Barthes, a reflection of references from any single one of a myriad traditions: "the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture"; therefore, it is never original. The perspective of the author is henceforward removed from the text, and the boundaries formerly imposed by the notion of one authorial voice, one ultimate and universal meaning, are destroyed. The explanation and meaning of a work needs not be found in the person(s) who produced it, "as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author 'confiding' in us". The persona of an author can safely be disregarded when interpreting a text, because the words are rich enough themselves with all of the traditions of language. To expose meanings in a written work without resorting to the celebrity of an author is, to Barthes, to allow language to speak, rather than author.

In the particular case of the present study, the word 'Shakespeare' will be taken to mean both the revered genius of English letters and, to the purpose of textual analysis, the 'mediator', 'mediumistic intermediary', as it were, who has conveyed to audiences and readers his reality, together with the multiple intertextualities converging onto his text. The above remarks presuppose that William Shakespeare will be a key "informant" in this work, as his qualified

"spokesmanship" will throw considerable light on the ideological structure of his age, independently of the myriad intertextual elements that integrated into his text. The author is not to be pronounced completely "dead" in this study, even though he should be considered to be the "carrier" of multifarious intertextuality. However, no attempt will be made to trace a biography of the playwright, as this endeavour stands beyond the scope of this investigation.

1.2.4.- A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* first saw the light in 1603, in what is now known as the First Quarto (Q1) version. It is much shorter than the version used now. Some parts are simplified and many of the speeches have been reduced. This has often been seen as a 'pirated' version, that is, one produced without permission of the author. The person who prepared this text may have remembered lines during a performance, or seen some individual actors' parts and stage promptbooks. He evidently had a very vague idea of the long speeches, in which he may have remembered only important words here and there together with the general drift of some lines (Lott, 1968).

The first Quarto is not, therefore, a solid basis for a study of the play. A new version appeared in 1604 (Q2), which was most probably published with Shakespeare's approval. Q2 is the basis of the accepted text of *Hamlet*. It is much longer than Q1; the philosophical passages especially are printed more fully, and the whole play is generally coherent, unlike the Q1 version (Lott, 1968).

A well-known editor of Shakespeare's works, and the editor of the version of *Hamlet* that was used for the present study, Lott (1968) largely discusses the publication of the folio Edition:

After Shakespeare's death (1616), two of his associates prepared a large collection of his plays which became known as the First Folio (published 1623). This can be taken as the memorial volume to Shakespeare, assembled from manuscripts at least very close to the actors' versions of the plays. Many of the plays in this collection (unlike *Hamlet*) are unknown elsewhere, and the compilers must have had a formidable task getting the papers into some order and having so many plays printed in one collection. The printing itself is not well done; in places the printer seems to have set up his type without knowing what the passage meant, and the type-face is sometimes unclear. But the First Folio forms the most complete collection of Shakespeare's plays and many would have been irrecoverably lost if they had not been saved for it. F1, then, is the second key source for *Hamlet*; it omits some of the philosophical passages in Q2 (suggesting that F1 is close to an acting version, whereas Q2 was meant more for reading) and has a few lines which do not appear in Q2. These lines are unimportant and in some cases appear to have been omitted from Q2 because they might have been taken to refer to current affairs; for instance, the lines about the child actors (already mentioned in

connection with dating the play) do not appear in Q2, perhaps because at the time that edition appeared the Blackfriars company had become 'The Children of the Queen's Revels', and any disparaging reference to them would have been offensive to the Court.



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2.- THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the exploration of a literary work, the presentation of the socio-historical setting of its creation is central, especially if the study is to delve into Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as representing a historical transition. This transition is believed to go well beyond the passage from the Tudor period to the Stuart era in England. It should be noted that the historical perspective to be presented is related to the 'macro' movement from feudalism to capitalism in Europe in general, and in England in particular, with a particular focus on the bearing that this movement had on the England of William Shakespeare. It should also be observed that under no circumstance should the Tudor-Stuart move be altogether excluded from this perspective. On the contrary, the latter passage is felt to be a central part in the larger transitional moments that Europe underwent to reach the state of being part of is understood as historically 'modern'.

Hamlet was performed for the first time, it is believed, in 1603, right after the funeral of Queen Elizabeth I Tudor of England, and the accession of the new monarch: James I Stuart. This dynastic change meant more than a new ruler on the throne. England had gone through difficult times, as the Church has been reformed, the country was not on the best of terms with many other countries, especially with the Catholic Spain of Phillip II. The new king was the son of a ruler who had been more than Catholic-friendly: Mary Queen of Scots. All this occurred at a time where Renaissance art flourished all over Europe, and Humanism was embraced by many of the scholars of the age.

It would be a historical oversimplification to ignore the economic currents that underlay all the historical events described. Indeed, it would be a gross theoretical error not to acknowledge the existence of another revolution, so to speak, that had taken place and was taking place in Europe, and which shattered to pieces the old medieval system to give rise to a new economic, social and political order.

2.1.- THE TRANSITION FROM FEUDALISM TO CAPITALISM

2.1.1.- OVERVIEW

In his book *Western Civilizations* (1973), the historian Edward McNall Burns affirms that both the Renaissance and the reformation were accompanied by fundamental economic changes. He observes that the religious and intellectual upheavals would not have been at all possible without drastic alterations in the medieval economic system. This series of changes, marking the transition from the static, localised, non-profit economy of the late Middle Ages to the dynamic, worldwide capitalistic regime constitutes what the historian calls the *Commercial Revolution*.

The term Feudalism, first used in the seventeenth century, in its most classic definition refers to a Medieval European political system, which included a set of reciprocal legal and military obligations among the warrior nobility, resting on the three central concepts of lords, vassals, and fiefs (also called 'serfs'). However,

the word comes from the Latin term *feodum* (fief), in use at that time. It should be clear that the term *feudalism*, in relation to the system it represents was not known to people living in the Middle Ages (Bloch, 1961).

Capitalism, on the other hand, is to do with a socio-economic structure where the means of production are nearly always owned privately, are utilised for profit, and "in which investments, distribution, income, production and pricing of goods and services are determined through the operation of a market economy" (Obrinsky, 1983). It is usually believed to include the right of individuals and corporations to trade --using money-- in goods, services, labour and land.

McNall Burns (1973) explains that the causes leading to the beginning of the Commercial Revolution around the year 1300 are far from clear. He states that the reason for this is the fact that the process was slower and more gradual than is commonly supposed. If it is at all possible to isolate particular causes, the author suggests the following:

(1) the capture of a monopoly of Mediterranean trade by the Italian cities;

(2) the development of a profitable commerce between the Italian cities and the merchants of the Hanseatic League in Northern Europe;

(3) the introduction of coins of general circulation, such as the ducat of Venice and the florin of Florence;

(4) the accumulation of surplus Capital in trading, shipping, and mining ventures;

(5) the demand for war materials and the encouragement given by the new monarchs to the development of commerce in order to create more taxable wealth; and

(6) the desire for the products of the East stimulated by the reports of travellers, especially the fascinating account of the wealth of China published by Marco Polo upon his return from a trip to that country toward the end of the thirteenth century.

These factors enabled the early Renaissance people "new visions of riches and power" and provided them with some of the necessary elements for an expansion of business and trade. Therefore, they were logically dissatisfied with the "restricted ideal of the medieval guilds with its ban upon trading for unlimited profit" (McNall Burns, 1973).

Approximately two hundred years after it is believed to have begun, this revolution received a fresh incentive from the voyages of overseas discovery. The reasons why these voyages were undertaken are not hard to perceive: Spanish and Portuguese ambitions for a share in the trade with the Orient, which had for some time been monopolized by the Italian cities. The people of the Iberian peninsula were forced to pay high prices for all the deluxe articles (silks, perfumes, spices, and so on) imported from the East. It was therefore natural for Spanish and

Portuguese people to try to discover a new route to the East without Italian control. A second reason for these voyages of discovery was "the missionary fervour of the Spaniards. Their successful crusade against the Moors had generated a surplus of religious zeal, which spilled over into a desire to convert the heathen". To these causes one should add the progress in geographical knowledge and the introduction of the compass and the astrolabe (McNall Burns, 1973).

2.1.2. BEGINNINGS OF CAPITALISM

Most authors agree that private ownership of some means of production has been present in society, perhaps in a small degree, since the beginning of agriculture. Some writers see the medieval guild system as an antecedent of the modern capitalist concern, especially when this system used apprentices as a kind of paid labourer. Yet, medieval economic activity was tied to customs and controls which, alongside with the supremacy of the landed aristocracy, might expropriate wealth through fines, taxes, enforced loans and other such forms (Diakonoff, 1999). This meant that profit was very difficult to accumulate. In the eighteenth century, these impediments were successfully surmounted in the United Kingdom, which led capitalism to become the dominant economic system, and the same occurred in Western Europe by the nineteenth century (Scott and Marshall, 2005).

Some historians contend that the beginnings of merchant capitalism are traceable to the times of the Islamic Caliphate (ninth to twelfth centuries). There, a strong